

Dr. JAMES McCUNE SMITH

With great orators in the field like Ward, Douglass and others herein mentioned whose impassioned and stirring eloquence was then the charm of every occasion, there was little or no further opportunity in the last decade of the 1st half of the 19th century for any other member of the race to reap new laurels in this province. All that could be accomplished by eloquent appeals, happy retorts and inexorable platform logic was already being most powerful done. What, however was greatly needed was a profound, painstaking, scholarship which should prove capable of coping with the pseudo-scientific pretension then forever manifesting itself against the humanity of the colored race. It was just here that James McCune Smith was most fitted by nature and training to play an important ^{role} in the cause of his race. His studious habit of mind kept him armed with the latest weapons forged in the arsenal of science and his facile and trenchant pen knew how to "build the lofty rhyme." James McCune Smith was born in New York City in 1813, and with the exception of the years of his matriculation at the Glasgow University, lived continuously in that city. Very little has come down to us concerning his parentage, though there is every indication that he was well provided for in the way of early care and training. He himself gave it as a reason for his reply to Dr. Arville Dewey: that he was "the son of a slave, owing my liberty to the emancipation Act of the State of New York, and having kindred in a Southern State, some of them slaveholders, others slaves." As a pupil his name is frequently mentioned in Andrew's history of the African schools in New York City, which was published in 1830. There various performances in mathematics and in both prose and verse are given as the work of James M. Smith, a boy of only 13 or 14 years, and these compositions are always above mediocrity. The very last words in that work consist of some beautiful lines from his pen which show that even in his boyhood he possessed a mind of wide reach, and gifted with an unusual felicity of expression.

Like most of the others of that brilliant set of colored men who arose in New York City during the first quarter of the 19th century, James McCune Smith was educated in colored school No. 2 which was under the mastership of Chas. C. Andrews a noted British teacher there till up in the thirties and there was a tradition among the students about that Gamaliel of the black school room that whoever sat at his feet had aroused in him the intimations of those higher stirrings which always enable one to reach up to the universal in man. As far as colored men are concerned the celebrated British saying that no man who had not beheld the face of the great Lord North in the English Parliament could hope for oratorical success, might well be said of Chas. C. Andrews,

for there was scarcely a New York boy of this period who afterwards became distinguished with voice or pen that did not owe it to Principal Andrews. J. McCune Smith one of the prize pupils of this

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A Word about New York Colored Schools

Schools for colored children in New York City or as they were then called, the African Free Schools, antedate our Federal Government; these schools were first launched by the New York Manumission Society in 1787, which had itself only been started in the winter of 1785 - 6. Both the Society and the school were the outgrowth of efforts on the part of the kindly-disposed of the community to check the disgraceful business of kidnapping and selling colored people into slavery - a habit then almost universal in the larger Northern cities. The school was conducted for a long while in Cliff St. with from 30 to 40 pupils in attendance and under the mastership of a Cornelius Davis. (The trustees at the time were Melancton Smith, James Cogswell, Thomas Burling John Lawrence, John Bleecker, Lawrence Embree, Willet Seaman, Jacob Seaman, Nathaniel Lawrence, White Matlock, Matthew Clarkson, and John Murray, Jr. Other names such as those of Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and George Clinton were prominent on the roll of this New York Manumission Society- See Andrews' History, African Free Schools, pages 10 and 14). A woman teacher was added to the teaching, for in 1791 who instructed the girls in needlework and other household duties. This school was continued in this way for the next 20 years with the number of pupils varying between forty and sixty. This same African Free School has the further distinction of having been the second school in the United States to introduce the Lancastrian or Monitorial method of instruction. This new system was begun in 1809 with the coming of Mr. Chas. C. Andrews as master, and as its chief merit consisted in the employing of the more advanced to instruct the younger pupils new impetus was given both to the capacity and enrollment of the school. Under the new system the old school quarters in Cliff St. soon became too small and the trustees began to make great exertions to provide larger ones, but money was scarce in those martial days, and in the midst of it all the old Cliff St. School building with much else of the section was wiped out by fire in 1814 and the school question for colored pupils was threatened with an end. Temporary quarters were however secured in Dayer St. for a while, though these were far too small. But the very calamity which befell the trustees gave them new reason and argument for appealing to the philanthropic of the community. Friends now began to come in and the city itself was moved to come to their assistance with a school lot in Williams St., on which was builded a new school. In exactly one year after from the day of the burning of the old building the new one in Williams St. was ready for occupancy. This school which came in the course of time to be known as Colored

J M S 1 b

School No. 1 and which had accommodation for upward of two hundred students was opened for service in January 1815. But such in the meanwhile had become the desire for schooling among the colored youth of the city that the new building itself soon proved too inadequate. Therefore the trustees once more led by the noble-hearted John Murray, Jr., went to the public for further assistance. This time their demands were for more and enlarged accommodations. And such was the industry shown and the interest taken in the enterprise that another new school was ready for public use by 1820. This latter was the famous Colored School No. 2, and was situated in Mulberry St. The building was a splendid one for the time. It was a two story brick, seventy-five by 35 ft. in dimensions and had a seating capacity for more than five hundred pupils. It was to this school that Gen. LaFayette paid a visit in 1825 when on his last tour of America and witnessed the exercises especially conducted and heard an address of welcome delivered by one of the boys. The General had been an honorary member of the Manumission Society since 1788, and expressed great delight at being privileged to see such results of its good works.

Now it was James McCune Smith then a boy of eleven years who delivered this welcome address to greet Lafayette on behalf of his school and race, and both the General's " + thank you, my dear child", and young Smith's speech in full have been preserved to us. And many other of the exercises of that day have come down to us from Colored Schools Nos. 1 and 2.

But in spite of the wide range of study covered in principal Andrew's little school it was still of the Grammar grade, and could not give that exact higher training to which the ambition of young Smith early aspired. Such advantages had therefore to be sought elsewhere and by other means, . . . to this end he redoubled every energy to prepare himself. He not only studied assiduously but was fortunate in finding friends who aided him in his ambition. Said one who was well acquainted with him: Dr. Smith having from early youth evinced powers of mind and indications of talent of a superior order accompanied by a modest demeanor and the most unassuming manner (which are still his prevailing characteristics) induced some influential friends to make an effort to give him the advantages of an education suitable to his natural capabilities and acknowledged worth. Their efforts were eminently successful in procuring for him the benefits of a good elementary education together with such a degree of proficiency in classical attainments as would enable him to enter a higher institution under circumstances highly flattering to himself, and gratifying to his patrons. They accordingly endeavored to have him entered at a well-known institution of this State, but our evil genius prejudicially closed its portals against him, thus compelling him to seek elsewhere for the intellectual food he required." - Ramson F. Woke in his welcome address on Dr. Smith's return, at Broadway Tab. lecture room Oct. 26, 1837.) Who these good patrons were, and which the American College that refused him admission - it is not stated. Nor was such a refusal ^{unusually} out of the ordinary in those days to make it a lasting disgrace to the institution guilty of the act. What we do know however is that young Smith left New York in 1832 for Glasgow, Scotland, where he entered the famous University of that city, and remained for five years. At that great seat of learning our young seeker after wisdom won both the degree of bachelor of Arts and that of Doctor of Medicine. And not only did he achieve this distinction in scholarship for his race, but he constantly wielded both pen and voice for the antislavery cause while there. We find him now at one time touring Scotland with the Rev. Nathaniel Paul, the first of his race and fellow-countrymen, to get the British ear against American slavery, and now at another himself the principal speaker. His very presence at a great seat of learning, manifesting such brilliancy of intellect, was a powerful triumph for his race in that day of doubt in the Negro's humanity.

Dr. Smith was naturally of an unusually sunny disposition and this together with his innate modesty and reserve won him many friends while in the land of Burns. He himself has said of his experience in Scotland: "I bless the chance which opened up to me an association with the Wardlows, the Heighes, the Andersons and the Murrays, men whose names are the property neither of the

or the time in which they dwell, but will be held in grateful remembrance so long as civil and religious liberty shall be remembered. The privileges which I enjoyed in their society are greater than any a value at which I can estimate them

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And under the Thanesius, the Cummins, the Sanfords of the University of Glasgow, I enjoyed opportunities of improvement as ample as are afforded in any British institution and far more ample than can be yielded by any institution in America." (Dr. Smith's response to welcome home, Colored American Oct.26, 1837)

One or two selections of Dr. Smith's speeches while abroad have been preserved to us, which show him the same careful student of the times that he ever continued to be. But probably the best evidence of his pen at this time, was, the diary in which he chronicled the things and incidents that most impressed him during his trips and stay abroad. The grace and finish of these diary pages show that our young doctor was even on leaving home blessed with a felicity of style and expression which Addison himself might have envied. Dr. Smith came home with early autumn of 1837 but just before embarking met with two incidents which aroused him almost at the same time the keenest delight and the keenest sense of indignation. The pleasure came on this occasion (during 1836) through a visit from his patron and friend the Rev. Peter Williams of New York who had gone all the way to Scotland to see his protege. It was in fact through the efforts of that great divine that young Smith had been enabled to obtain the privilege of an education in Scotland, and his was the one name besides the widowed mother's which occurred most frequently in the young man's correspondence. But his joy in the arrival and welcome receptions to his friend was not destined to be of long duration. For in the very midst of fraternal greetings by the clergy and others the Rev. Williams was greeted by the evil genius of his country in the absolute denial of a passage home on an American ship by this American Captain. This one act showed the young student plainer than anything else could that American prejudice was still ready to go to all lengths to insult a colored man; and when early in the next May (1837) he himself met with the same rebuff, young Smith's indignation knew no bound. In his own case, Dr. Smith was told by Capt. Bigley of the Connicus that he could not get a cabin passage for any consideration because he was a Negro and he himself knew it. Now this was too much for the students and Scottish friends of the young doctor. They had associated with him too long, and knew too much about his real worth to allow such treatment of him to go unrebuked. At the great farewell banquet tendered in appreciation of the doctor's attainments, the whole student-body and faculty were present, to attest their high regard for the sterling qualities of the departing student and at the same time strongly condemned the conduct and language of the American captain. The remonstrance furthered declared that the despots of the old world scornfully point at America and say: " There is your glorious Re-

publican Freedom! There is the working of your voluntary system of religion! There is the cause of man in its perfection, and 2,500,000 human beings the cattle-property of the boasting native!

American President! American people - look at this picture. x x x x x We tell you frankly that your country will speedily be broken up into separate hostile, if not despotic state, if you do not abandon slavery; and you ought to think of St. Domingo and be wise! " How prophetic did this prove! Colored American Feb. 17 1833

Dr. Smith like his patron the Reverend Peter Williams had finally ^{to} come home in a British ship as the British vessels were and largely continue to be, the only ships on which colored man could obtain equal treatment with others. Another, right royal reception awaited our young doctor on his arrival in New York. This time it was from fellow-country race and former school-mates, and in the lecture-room of the old Broadway tabernacle where old familiar scenes and faces gladdened the end of his long journey:

" Oh where's the luxury like a smile at heart,
When the moind, breathing lays its load apart
When we some home again all tired out; -"

But the gathering and the literary character of the addresses made on this occasion were of an unusually high order. All of the leading abolitionists together with the leading colored people of the metropolis turned out to greet the young doctor on this his official welcome home. Mr. Ransom F. Wake, the young, accomplished master of the Mulberry St., school, delivered the principal address of welcome, while Thomas S. Sidney, the rising young wit, but alas -

" O fairest flower no sooner blown but blasted -"
the Arthur Hallam with none to edit " his remains ", - read the special greetings from a committee of citizens in a series of resolutions. Our young doctor now threw himself heart and soul into his profession and the cause of his race. He opened a small drug store gink office at 93 Broadway, residing in the meanwhile in Resde St. with his mother, and gave his spare hours to aid in helping to edit the Colored American.

Soon after Dr. Smith's arrival home, the Colored American" announced him as a valued acquisition to their corps of correspondents. That paper was then in the hands of Messrs. Bell, Cornish and Ray, with the second named gentleman on the point of yielding the editorial chair to the then general Agent Ray, and was what its files still show it to have been and what Lewis Tappan meant in his compliment of " a neatly printed and well edited paper;" (Arthur Tappan, page 185;) one of the very best edited papers yet issued by the race. Our author's first articles were the selections from his diary, and as he did not sign his name to such of the editorial comment as he wrote from time to time, these seem to be all that one can definitely assign to his pen. One or

two lectures on prehnology delivered in Philadelphia and other points also belong to the first years of his return. But the best productions of our author at this period are his address before the American Antislavery Society in May 1838 and his lecture on Haiti. This latter was delivered for the benefit of the colored Orphan Asylum of New York in 1841 and brought out by the management in pamphlet at the same time. To this period also belongs the retort courteous which he returned with interest through the New York Tribune upon Dr. Orville Dewey's assertion that "Emancipation had taken place here (in free States) yet the free blacks are worse off than the slaves of the South - not being so well clothed, fed or so happy." Dr. Dewey uttered these remarks in a lecture on American Morals and Manners which he delivered in New York in 1844. Dr. Smith forthwith challenged him to debate the question touching the condition of the colored people and failing to get a reply from the Rev. exposed the shallowness of his argument through the Tribune and the Antislavery Standard. How ably Dr. Smith maintained his position is shown by the fact that when Dr. Dewey published his lecture in book form he referred to the colored people of New York and Philadelphia as being exception to those who were not benefitted by freedom.

During the early forties Dr. Smith was married to Miss Barnett a daughter of Barnett of New York much against the will of the bride's parents but finally became reconciled, and, the young couple took up residence in Williamsburg, where they ever afterwards lived. Dr. Smith was an ardent worker in the various conventions held by leading colored men of New York State during the two decades just before the Civil War and his advice on such occasions was always of the most practical kind. Like most colored New Yorkers his antislavery views accorded more with those of the Smithsonians than of the Garrisonian wing, though he was always large enough to recognize the absolute sincerity of the great Boston Antislavery school. Our author was also one of the select committee of colored men who served as almoners of the great land-benefit which the magnanimous Gerrit Smith in 1847 deeded in small parcels to as many colored men as desired to settle upon it in order that they might thus meet the New York Suffrage qualifications. But his mind was too rich and varied to be confined within narrow limits. Most of the race publications as well as organizations seem to have held with the colored American when it declared Dr. Smith public property to be drawn upon at will by that paper's management. We find him early announced therefore as a regular contributor to the North Star," and its successors, the Frederick Douglass' paper, and in the course of time, one of the editors of the Anglo-African Magazine. Several of our author's best productions first appeared in this latter periodical, and went far toward making it what its files in every way attest, the best magazine which has yet been put forth by a colored management.

Like most of the writings of colored men in the antebellum days many of Dr. Smith's productions were of a disputatious and polemical nature, and as is the case with such works, have suffered from that fatal rust of disuse which always overtakes writings born of a controversy. But not a few of the subjects touched upon by him even in the heat of debate have singularly enough proved to have unexpected perennation. The questions of emigration, or colonization in Africa, and of the size and weight of the Negro's brains were and are among these, and the arguments which this profound colored man advanced still hold a timeliness from his manner and method of treatment. But as his title implies, Dr. Smith's career had other than a literary value for his race. He achieved great distinction in the practice of medicine, and from his drug store most of those colored druggists such as the Rays and the Whites who afterwards won notable success in their line there in New York, first gained the rudiments of the art in Dr. James McCune Smith's Broadway establishment.

Thus part of the great scholar and physician's life-work has been at least continued by members of his race, though not by his family. The Smith drug establishment (55 West Broadway) was continued for some time mainly as he had left it, but passed finally into other hands, and the very name of the erudite physician, if it survives at all now lives only in a maiden teacher with no longer pride in his achievements. Our scholar continued to divide his time between his profession and the interest of his race till the breaking of the Civil War, and even after; for he then became foremost among those who urge colored men to go to the front.

Dr. Smith was throughout life an active member of St. Phillip's church, and at the time of his death, also the treasurer of the society for promoting Education Among Colored Children. In fact he was always to the front in whatever tended toward the advancement of the colored man's course. Our author died on the 17th of Nov., 1885, but not till after the consummation of the great cause for which he hoped and labored throughout life. He was at the time living in Williamsburg whither he had lately moved from his old home at 30 Catherine St. after the terrible draft riot of July in 1863. Under the heading, "Death of a distinguished colored man," this notice of the occurrence appeared at the time: (New York Tribune (Thursday morning) Nov. 13, 1885.)

"Dr. James McCune Smith, one of the best known colored men in this vicinity, died in Williamsburg yesterday evening of a pulmonary affection, from which he had been suffering for nearly 20 months, in the 52nd year of his age. He was born in New York, was educated and graduated at Glasgow, Scotland, and had been a practicing physician for a quarter of a century. He had always felt a deep interest in the cause of his race and had labored zealously and constantly to ameliorate and elevate the condition of the colored man in this country both bond and free, who have lost in him one of their best friends and most able advocates. He was also the attendant physician of the Colored Orphan Home almost from the date of his return from the University of Glasgow till the lamentable destruction of that institution by the draft riot in 1863. There were always several hundred inmates in the home. Frederick Douglass himself has recorded a visit of his to the Home

through kindness of "Dr. McCune Smith, the constant physician of the establishment," (North Star, May 14, 1849)